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# More than we need to know?

**I**'m perplexed. I believe in the people's right to know. But where should we draw the line? American democracy can operate effectively only when citizens have basic facts about major domestic and foreign policy issues.

But we don't need to know every detail on every issue. We live in a media-saturated society — overwhelmed by a barrage of facts and opinions.

One major responsibility of the print and electronic press is to sort out the key facts, the salient opinions, the relevant alternatives. And, of course, the press should separate fact from opinion, especially their own opinion.

On this, all the newspaper and broadcasting codes agree. But performance is another matter. We recall with astonishment that The New York Times in 1971 with great secrecy published a whole volume of secret and top-secret documents on U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, popularly known as the Pentagon Papers.

I believed then and I believe now that this was irresponsible and did not serve the people's right or need to know. A private and unaccountable institution had usurped the prerogatives of duly elected U.S. officials.

**T**here are many other cases where the media, especially newspapers given to adversary journalism, publish unnecessary information that endangers national security by aiding our sworn enemy, the Soviet Union, or by encouraging terrorists.

In the past two years The Washington Post has carried three front-page stories giving sensitive spe-

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cific details that in no way served the needs or interests of American citizens.

1. On July 5, 1985, The Post revealed the identity of the FBI-coded license plates on the diplomatic cars of 18 countries with embassies in Washington and consulates elsewhere, including the Soviet Union, Iran, Libya, South Africa, Canada, France, and Great Britain.

The purpose, said the article, was to enable the FBI and other law-enforcement agencies to help identify diplomatic vehicles quickly.

One result of the information, of course, was to enable every kook or terrorist to spot his favorite target, courtesy of The Washington Post. No civilian citizen needed this security information.

2. On Aug. 22, 1986, The Post's lead story, "50 'Stealth' Fighters in Operation," carried a detailed technical drawing of the secret plane taken from an obscure publication. The story referred to the stealth fighter as a "top secret" project.

Our government has sought to keep secret the technology of this advanced plane and the location of what The Post called "secret squadrons," for obvious national security reasons. But The Post disagreed and published the details.

Why?

3. On April 5, 1987, The Post in another Page 1 story, "The NRO: Inside Our Most Secret Spy Agency," published sensitive details about the National Reconnaissance Office that is responsible for military satellite program. The story acknowledged that the NRO "officially does not exist." Nevertheless, it gave the precise location (number on the door) of the NRO's top secret headquarters in the Pentagon. It informed its readers and potential terrorists that this "outermost of its several doors" carries the bland words: "Office of Space Systems." All this in the first two sentences.

Not content with these minute details, The Post then pinpointed precisely the NRO's top-secret site, "the Air Force's Satellite Control Facility at Sunnyvale, Calif., about an hour's drive south from San Francisco. The 'Big Blue Cube,' as it is sometimes called, is the place from which all U.S. military satellites are controlled." The Post failed to provide a detailed road map.

All informed Americans know that the Soviet Union and the United States have spy satellites. And the overwhelming majority believe we are more secure because of the vital information gathered by our spies in the sky. But as citizens, we can discharge our responsibilities without knowing the exact location of NRO facilities, unless we happen to work there.

**A**fter reading each of these three stories, I sent a brief letter to The Washington Post asking why it carried detailed, sensitive and classified information, especially since such facts did not meet any reasonable right-to-know criteria. Each time I hoped my letter would be published, and perhaps commented on. No letter was ever published and I never received an acknowledgement, much less an answer.

Why did The Washington Post do what it did? Is it simply one more example of the inability of Americans to keep a secret? Or is it a deeper malady? A century and a half ago Alexis de Tocqueville said that a democracy "cannot combine its measures with secrecy or await the consequences with patience." There is much truth in his observation.

But there are newspapers and reporters who can distinguish the difference between what is and what should be kept secret and what the people ought to know to function as informed citizens. I fear The Post has sometimes ignored this vital distinction.